

# Cottage Grove

## Heritage Preservation Planning in a Suburban Community

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Cottage Grove is located in southern Washington County, Minnesota, about 20 miles southeast of Saint Paul, with the Mississippi River forming its southern boundary. The modern city limits are coextensive with those of the former Cottage Grove Township and encompass approximately 36 square miles. Prior to Euro-American settlement, this area was occupied by Native Americans for more than 10,000 years and their presence is recorded in several important archeological sites. Euro-American settlement began in 1843, and by the time Minnesota became a state in 1858, Cottage Grove was one of the region's leading agricultural districts. The transition from agrarian township to second-ring commuter suburb began in 1955 and for the next four decades Cottage Grove ranked in the top 10 Minnesota communities with the largest net population growth. In 1999, an estimated 30,000 people lived within the city limits. However, roughly two-thirds of the city's land area remains rural in character, much of it in farms, and the majority of Cottage Grove's historic properties is related to the heritage of agriculture and rural lifeways.

When Cottage Grove enacted its first historic preservation ordinance in 1981, its heritage resources were at risk primarily because local government decisionmaking was based on incomplete and often inaccurate information, with no effective strategy for integrating cultural resources management with community development planning. Alarm that the community's history was disappearing into the maw of urban

development alerted several public officials to the need to incorporate historical and archeological resources in local planning. However, much of the early impetus for creating a local government preservation initiative came from grassroots environmental activists, who had come to regard historic resources protection as a friendly adjunct to their natural resources conservation agenda.

Today, as in 1981, the mission of the city historic preservation program is to protect and enhance Cottage Grove's significant heritage resources for the benefit of present and future citizens. Four fundamental concepts provide the underpinnings for this mission:

- Historic buildings and archeological sites represent a set of scarce, non-renewable cultural resources that are critical assets for community development.
- The primary threats to Cottage Grove's heritage resources come from land development activities.

The basic tenet of historic preservation in the City of Cottage Grove is the application of the conservation ethic to municipal government operations. The conservation ethic is rooted in the principle that saving important resources for the benefit of future generations is always in the public interest. Imperatives of the conservation ethic include a commitment to the preservation of cultural heritage, the perpetuation of the community's historic identity and character, and the adoption of a conservative approach to environmental change. Because it seems likely that historic buildings, archeological sites, and other historic properties will become more valuable with the passage of time, and that future residents will want to learn more, not less, about their community's past, it is necessary for today's decision makers to act responsibly as stewards of those heritage resources that can be preserved.

From the "Historic Preservation Element,"  
*Cottage Grove Comprehensive Plan* (1999).

- Historic preservation is an important public service and a legitimate responsibility of city government.
- To be effective, protective measures need to focus on the preservation of significant resources—not everything that is old is worth preserving.

Building upon these assumptions, the city has enacted a series of historic preservation ordinances and a succession of comprehensive preservation plans.

### **The City Historic Preservation Program**

Cottage Grove established its municipal historic preservation program in August 1981, when the city council enacted the first in a series of ordinances that form Chapter 13A of the City Code. Since 1984, the program has been managed by the City Historic Preservation Officer (CHPO), a historic preservation professional who is an adjunct member of the Community Development Department staff and the designated manager of the Department's Historic Preservation Division (HPD).<sup>1</sup> For 10 years after the adoption of the first preservation ordinance, citizen participation in preservation planning was handled by the Parks, Recreation, and Natural

Resources Commission, which had been designated as the city's heritage preservation commission. In 1990, the city code was amended to create the Advisory Committee on Historic Preservation (ACHP), which has since functioned as the city's official heritage preservation commission. The ACHP has five citizen voting members who are appointed to two-year terms by the city council and four ex-officio, non-voting members: a representative of the Washington County Historical Society; a member of the Parks,

Recreation, and Natural Resources Commission; a member of the Planning and Zoning Commission; and the CHPO, who serves as the committee's permanent secretary.

The centerpiece of the city preservation program is the City Register of Historic Sites and Landmarks, the local equivalent of the National Register of Historic Places. Properties are nominated to the City Register by the ACHP and are formally designated by city council resolution. The registration document takes the form of a preservation planning report prepared by the CHPO, which is referenced by resolution as the official preservation guideplan for the historic site or district. At the end of 1999, there were 12 buildings and sites listed in the City Register, as well as four properties that were listed in the National Register before 1982. (All registered properties receive equal protection under the city's preservation code.) In addition, more than 30 buildings, sites, structures, and districts have been determined eligible for nomination to the City Register and are treated as critical resources in community development planning.

To identify historic resources that may qualify for nomination to the City Register, the HPD is responsible for conducting an ongoing survey of buildings, structures, archeological sites, and landscapes within the city limits. Properties that meet at least one of the City Register eligibility criteria are recorded with photographs, maps, and written information that are deposited in the Heritage Resources Inventory maintained by the CHPO. Since 1981, almost 300 historic properties have been documented by survey and evaluated for their City Register eligibility. Late in 1999, the HPD initiated a study of buildings and sites dating from between 1941 and 1972 (nicknamed the "Ozzie & Harriet Project") that is expected to result in additions to the Heritage Resources Inventory.

By ordinance, every application for a city permit in relation to a property listed in or eligible for the City Register is reviewed by the ACHP. The Secretary of the Interior's treatment standards are the required basis for review decisions, and no city permit in relation to a City Register property can be issued without a certificate of appropriateness. As a member of the staff technical review committee, the CHPO reviews all development projects for their potential effects on historic properties, a function that in many ways parallels the federal Section 106 review and

*Grey Cloud Lime Kiln, a vernacular lime kiln erected during the mid-19th century on a backwater of the Mississippi River, is within the Cottage Grove city limits and listed in both the National Register of Historic Places and the City Register of Historic Sites and Landmarks.*





*Hope Glen Farm, a Tudor Revival Style farmhouse built in 1917. The barn and agricultural outbuildings date from the late-19th and early-20th centuries.*

compliance process. The CHPO and ACHP also work closely with city officials outside of the Community Development Department and with the Planning Commission on a wide range of development-related issues. The city code provides for both civil (misdemeanor) and administrative (permit revocation) penalties for non-compliance.

Under the auspices of the ACHP, the CHPO provides public information and education services, works with property owners and developers on the treatment of individual historic resources, and serves as a point of contact between the city and its various preservation partners. Over the years, the Cottage Grove has developed relationships with several state and federal preservation agencies, including the Minnesota Historical Society and the National Park Service, as well as other local preservation programs, historical organizations, and conservation groups. On November 6, 1985, the Secretary of the Interior certified Cottage Grove's historic preservation program as meeting the Certified Local Government (CLG) requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended. One of the state's original CLGs, Cottage Grove is an active participant in the federal-state-local government preservation partnership.

The 1981 preservation ordinance directed the preservation commission to "prepare a comprehensive cultural resource management plan for the city." The first preservation guide plan, adopted in 1982, was in effect a blueprint for attaining CLG status under the National Historic Preservation Act amendments of 1980. The original Comprehensive Cultural Resource

Management Plan (CCRMP) was published in 1986 as a combined policy manual and historic contexts reference document. A massive document running to more than 300 pages, the CCRMP symbolized the city's commitment to preservation as an important public enterprise. However, by the early 1990s, key parts of the plan were becoming badly outdated as the result of changes in city code and administrative reorganizations, and by the accumulation of new data on the number and significance of the city's heritage resources. Historic preservation goals and policies were revised in 1992 as part of the city's legislatively-mandated 10-year comprehensive planning cycle. The resulting "Historic Preservation Element," published as a chapter in the city's official Comprehensive Plan, was notable primarily for its attempt to more fully integrate preservation planning with other city planning for land use, housing, economic development, parks, and public works. In 1996, the ACHP revised and updated the entire CCRMP and produced what is commonly referred to as Cottage Grove's "second generation" preservation plan.

#### ***A Vision for the 21st Century***

In 1997, the HPD and the ACHP initiated "Preservation Visions for the 21st Century," a comprehensive review of the city's cultural resource management responsibilities and future preservation planning needs. This effort consumed the better part of two years and involved assembling more than two dozen local historic preservation reports and planning documents, reviewing historic preservation plans prepared for other units of government, and interviewing property owners, local officials, and staff from other preservation agencies for their evaluation of program performance. Working with the Planning and Zoning Commission (which was simultaneously revising the city's comprehensive land use plan), the CHPO developed a series of background papers on the state of the city's heritage resources. With this information in hand, the ACHP was able to shape a vision of where the city preservation program was headed and articulated a strategic plan for carrying this vision forward.<sup>2</sup>

While previous planning efforts had focused on program development, a critical element of the "visioning" process was identification of strategic outcomes as a way to measure program performance. After assessing the progress

made on critical preservation issues during 1981-1998, the ACHP developed four statements that it expected to characterize the state of the city preservation program in the year 2020:

- Cottage Grove will be a distinctive and recognizable community where preserved historic buildings and sites provide physical links to the past and foster a sense of community and personal identity.
- Historic buildings will be preserved as functional, useful parts of the modern city and will be a focus for important education, edification, recreation, and economic development activities.
- Core historic preservation program activities will continue to emphasize comprehensive planning, identification, and evaluation of heritage resources, the City Register of Historic Sites and Landmarks, and design review, with important initiatives in the areas of heritage education and tourism, economic development, and treatment of historic properties.
- Historic preservation will continue to stress empowerment of individuals and communities through stewardship, advocacy, education, and partnership.

To achieve these outcomes, the ACHP did not recommend any major policy changes, but did establish a list of preservation benchmarks to help future decisionmakers evaluate the success or shortcomings of the city historic preservation program. These benchmarks reflect the basic assumptions and goals incorporated in both the 1986 and 1994 preservation plans and together

*Dr. William W. Furber House, a Colonial Revival style cottage built in 1901 in "old Cottage Grove" village, is listed in the City Register of Historic Sites and Landmarks.*



form a general work plan for the next 15 to 20 years.

More planning and action by public officials and citizens will be necessary if Cottage Grove is to continue to be successful in delivering historic preservation as a city service. Experience has shown the effectiveness of a comprehensive approach that fully integrates preservation with other community development planning. From the efforts already made, certain conditions for program success seem to have emerged that may be applicable to other communities. First, local government preservation programs must emphasize people over things to develop the consensus necessary to sustain public understanding and approval. Put another way, the constituency for preservation has to be broadened beyond the traditional core group of preservationists to encompass citizens of diverse backgrounds and interests. Second, the program must have strong leadership within the structure of local government and the institutional means for playing an active role in shaping community development policy. And third, the program must be supported by all of the constituent parts that make up local government, including elected officials, administrative departments, professional staff, boards, and commissions. All three are formidable challenges—and great opportunities for success.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Since the early 1990s, the City Historic Preservation Officer position has been budgeted at approximately 500 to 600 hours per year, about half of which is financed by grants.
- <sup>2</sup> The current city historic preservation plan forms an element (chapter) in the City of Cottage Grove Comprehensive Plan 2020, which was adopted by the Cottage Grove City Council late in 1999. Because the entire plan has not yet been approved by the Twin Cities' regional government planning agency, the 1999 plan is still technically a draft, pending approval by the Metropolitan Council. The plan text can be viewed on the Internet at <[www.cottage-grove.org](http://www.cottage-grove.org)>.

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Photos by the author.